

The Eastern cottontail rabbit's quick and erratic movement makes it a popular species among hunters. Populations have declined in recent decades due, in part, to changes in land-use patterns simplifying the landscape and leaving fewer places where rabbits thrive. Habitat management can increase local populations.



**REPRODUCTION:** Breeding season begins in February and continues into September. Females nest in an old field or open woodland. The average litter size is 3 – 5, with the largest litters generally born in May and June. Females may produce three to five litters per year. Approximately 50% of the young survive to leave the nest and less than 50% of those survive until fall.

**HABITAT:** The cottontail's home range is less than 10 acres, therefore, essential habitat components must be met within a 10-acre area.

**BEDDING:** Cottontails prefer denser vertical and horizontal vegetation than surrounding areas. This indicates they recognize variations within habitats and select microhabitats to minimize effects of weather. For example, dense overhead cover insulates against heat loss in winter and heat gain in summer. Sites with less overhead cover in spring and fall allow energy gain from incoming radiation.

**DIVERSITY:** Cottontails prefer diversity in forestland. Provide a mix of low, dense grasses for nesting; forbs, legumes, and grasses for food; and dense escape cover such as honeysuckle or blackberry thickets and brush piles. Intersperse components to minimize travel and exposure to predators. In grasslands, prescribe burning, mowing and rotational strip disking improve habitat conditions. In row crop fields, corners, fencerows and drainage ditches can be maintained in early successional habitat without affecting crop production.

**FOOD PLOTS:** Food plots are not proven to increase rabbit survival or reproduction; however, use in the winter is generally high. Roadsides, firebreaks, and food plots planted in clovers, vetch, browntop millet, wheat, oats or other preferred foods attract rabbits. Locate food plots adjacent to escape cover.

**POPULATION MANAGEMENT:** Although rabbits have a high reproductive rate in quality habitat, rabbit populations should be controlled. A harvest rate of less than 25% of the total population will have little negative impact on a healthy rabbit population. Landowners and managers can use repeated spotlight counts to estimate local populations and set harvest goals.

Photo Credit: Claude Jenkins



This information is provided by the Alabama Forestry Commission

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